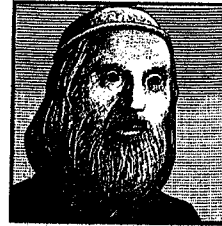


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# HOMER



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# JOYCE

*Interpretations of the classic works  
of Western literature*

*by*

Wallace Gray

FOREWORD BY STEVEN MARCUS

"So clear, so unshakeable on the value of  
these works, so informative  
yet so personal. Wallace Gray  
has illuminating things to say."

—Frank Kermode

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FOR MY STUDENTS

# Inferno

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**T**O BEGIN with a comedy of absurdity before discussing Dante's comedy of sublimity, Lady Bracknell, in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, asks Jack his qualifications for engagement to her daughter, Gwendolen. A man about to be married, she says, should know "either everything or nothing. Which do you know?" After some hesitation over which answer she wants, Jack hazards that he knows nothing. "I am pleased to hear it," Lady Bracknell replies, "I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone."

I agree with Eliot when he says that it is better to know nothing about the *Divine Comedy* before reading it than to know everything; a "natural ignorance" will allow for an appreciation of the exotic delicacy of the poem which a substantial amount of literary and historical scholarship might prevent. If you asked how to get to the World Trade Center in New York and were handed a map which, when unfolded, was exactly the size of Manhattan, you would still be as ignorant of the location of the building as you were before being given the map. I intend to provide a small, hand-drawn map of Dante's political and literary life, which will be of aid in following Dante and Virgil through the geography of Hell. For later visits to favorite locations, the tourist can consult the more than extensive scholarly "maps"—some of them actually larger than the poem—that are available in any good library.

Many of the poems we have examined have been quest poems in which the hero is searching either for a lost home or for a new home. Both Odysseus and Aeneas, during the course of their journeys, make dangerous, hero-validating trips to a Hades where their own future is predicted. Dante is on a quest

for salvation, and he also is told his future during his trip to Hell. The beauty and the details of the poem engage the involvement of another quester: the reader.

Aristotle is one of the primary influences on Dante, but to Dante man is not an animal, and he lives not just in a city, but in the world and in eternity. The last two territories are both immediate to Dante, and they are the major concerns of his mature work.

Dante was born in 1265 in Florence, a city that had been divided for generations by the struggle for supremacy between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope. Dante's parents were middle-class and among the adherents to the Guelf party, many of whom supported the idea of equality between the Emperor and the Pope. As a young man Dante dedicated himself to poetry, especially Virgil's, and to philosophy. He fought as a soldier for Florence, and served on various councils, including the important Council of the One Hundred, and he also held the high office of Prior. In 1302 he opposed the Pope's attempt to exert secular rule, and, on an embassy to appeal to the Pope, he was detained, banished by the leading politicians from his beloved Florence, and sentenced to death.

He lived a life of exile, earning his living as mediator between various noble houses in an Italy that was in constant turmoil over the conflict between Pope and Emperor. His wife and children remained in Florence, the children were later condemned to death because of their father's beliefs and had to flee, and he spent the last eight years of his life with his family in Ravenna, probably teaching poetry, where he died in 1321. He had spent most of the previous ten years working on his poem.

The purpose of his poem grows out of his religious and political life: to set the Emperor and the Pope on the straight path, one bringing order to the world, the other bringing order to man's eternal soul.

The philosophy and theology of his poem were set out earlier in his *De Monarchia*, a work about universal empire.

Founding his ideas upon Saint Paul's, which followed those of Jesus, Dante holds to the duality of the life of man, in that one should render proper dues to the always separate spheres of church and state. The Emperor was to reign over the Earthly Paradise: mortality, the blessedness that comes from using all one's faculties, philosophy, moral and intellectual virtues, and reason. The Pope was to reign over the Heavenly Paradise: man's immortal soul; theology; wisdom and power; the virtues of faith, hope, and love; and the Holy Spirit.

In the *Divine Comedy* Virgil symbolizes earthly Reason and Beatrice the eternal Holy Spirit. Dante first saw Beatrice (she was probably a Florentine gentlewoman named Bice) in his early youth, and, though they perhaps never exchanged words, she was to become a major symbol in his life and poetry. She was young when she died, and she became the Platonic path for Dante from philosophy to beauty, from beauty to love, and from love to Divine Goodness. She initiates Dante's journey through the afterlife, watches over him in the *Inferno*, and guides him through the uppermost region of *Purgatorio* and then through *Paradiso*, territories inaccessible and thus unknown to the pre-Christian Virgil.

The poem is a celebration of free will, and it reflects the medieval rather than the coming Renaissance world, particularly in its theology, structure, and use of symbolic numerology.

The poem is composed of three canticles (the Trinity), each canticle containing thirty-three cantos, except the first, whose prologue-type canto makes a total of one hundred cantos (a "perfect" number) in the entire poem. In a final veneration of the Trinity, the stanzas are tercets written in *terza rima*, an interlocking rhyme scheme of *aba* in the first tercet, *bcb* in the second, and so on throughout each canto.

As Dante wanted his work to be read by all his compatriots, and not just scholars, he chose to write it in Florentine Italian rather than in Latin. He called it a *Commedia*, not only because it had a happy ending but because he thought the term was derived from Greek words meaning village and song, and his

poem was to be a song of the people, written in the "careless and humble" language of everyday speech. It acquired its present title in 1555 from an editor who truly considered the poem to be Divine: the purpose of the poem is the salvation of human souls.

Dante draws heavily on both Plato and Aristotle in determining the nature of sin—a word, of course, unknown to those two philosophers.

Plato constructs his *Republic* on his analysis of a political and human psyche consisting of reason (mind), spirit (heart), and appetite (stomach and sexual organs). The citizens of his state fall into one of those categories: philosophers of the mind, vigilant guardians of the state, and common people, who are ruled by their appetites. Dante is presenting the path to an ordered world, and he uses these three elements of the soul to show the disorder that results when appetite overcomes reason, spirit overcomes reason, and—most heinous of all—reason overcomes reason.

Dante considers appetites such as lust and gluttony to be innately human, as they are an excessive pursuit of something intrinsically good, and he locates those guilty of lust and gluttony, along with the other incontinents, in the upper circles of Hell, where their punishments are not as severe as those endured farther below.

Distortion of man's spirited element into violence against others, self, God, nature, or art is much more serious to Dante than sins of appetite, and he locates the violent sinners in a lower circle. Although the combative and spirited element in man is necessary to his survival, it must be controlled by reason.

What Dante considers most sinful of all is to use the one faculty of man which distinguishes him from animals, reason, in order to distort or betray reason. These sinners, the fraudulent and treacherous, occupy the eighth and ninth circles, the very bottom of Hell, where their punishments are greater than any others. It is there we find the wily and crafty Ulysses.

Dante also makes use of Aristotle, who, of course, uses Plato. In his *Ethics* Aristotle propounds the values of moderation, a mean between extremes, as, for example, courage is a mean between the excess of rashness and the deficiency of cowardice. Dante has peopled his Hell with sinners guilty of a lack of moderation, but particularly so in the upper circles, where he even pairs the avaricious and the prodigal in the fourth circle. Aristotle would have recognized all the sinners in Dante's Hell except for two groups he could never have conceived of—heretics and those guilty of original sin.

Dante agrees with Aristotle that good is the end at which nature aims, that this is the aim of God for the soul, and that, consequently, no man could hate God. He believes with Aristotle that man's faculties are not intrinsically evil, and that it is disorder in the soul which causes evil. Aristotle and Dante share with Plato a recognition of the importance of the harmony of the soul.

Christian theology, for Dante, thus develops from Plato's ideas about looking beyond the world for the highest good, Aristotle's presentation of moderation and final purpose, and the Hebraic prophets, who looked behind and blamed bad conduct in the past for present and future evils. Dante projects these concepts into a world created by providential design and presided over jointly by Emperor and Pope. He peoples his Hell with those who bring disorder to either the political or the sacred world created by God.

Finally, Dante inherits the great gift of allegory from Provençal poetry and medieval hermeneutics.

The poets of southern France, in their devotion to love and to beliefs the Church considered heretical (Albigensian), almost made a goddess out of their devotion to, and need for, secrecy. These poets of Provence flourished from around the years 1000–1200, writing in a tongue that combined the languages and cultures that had been pouring into the area for centuries: French, German, Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Arabic. Their Courts of Love and veneration of love certainly contributed to

*Tristan*, but what Dante seems to have learned most from them, in addition to allegory, is the conversational directness of their poetry, their gift of lyricism, and the ingenuity of their complicated poetic forms. Their culture and spoken language, but not their large body of phantasmagoric poetry, were wiped out by the Church in the war against the Albigensian heresy.

Two of the best Provençal poets are in Dante's poem. Bertran de Born appears in one of the most horrifying scenes in Hell: as he severed families and political ties on earth in the family of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, he carries his own severed head, using the eyes as a beacon to guide his way. Dante puts Arnaut Daniel in Purgatory, where he is in a fire that refines him. T. S. Eliot pays his homage to Daniel in *The Waste Land*, and Ezra Pound offers his courtesy in a number of poems. Pound translated a great many Provençal poems and was responsible for a renewed interest in Provençal poetry among a large number of readers and poets in the twentieth century.

Another of Dante's allegorical methods is a direct inheritance from interpretive practices of medieval theologians, who read Biblical passages on four levels: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Dante himself was fond of applying this method to Psalm 114, which begins "When Israel went out of Egypt . . ." (King James Version).

Although there can be many readings of the psalm, Dante, in a letter to his patron, Cangrande della Scalla, considers the opening line of the psalm to signify four journeys: a *literal* Old Testament journey of the Jews out of Egypt, an *allegorical* New Testament journey from sin to salvation, a *moral* journey of the soul from grief to a state of grace, and an *anagogical* journey of the soul from temporal corruption to eternal glory. (In *Ulysses* Joyce uses the opening line of the psalm, when Stephen exits from Leopold Bloom's kitchen, to indicate his release from the bondage of Dublin into the life of an artist.)

The poem begins with the directness, vivacity, and visual clarity that will continue throughout; and, like other epic

poems—for that is what *The Divine Comedy* is—it begins in the middle of the action. And not only in the middle of the action, but in the symbolic middle of Dante's journey through life, for the time is the year 1300, when Dante is thirty-five, and the journey through Hell lasts from late Friday evening (the day of the crucifixion) until early Easter morning—the time of Christ's own journey to the afterworld to bring His message to the dead.

The three major divisions of the *Inferno* are represented by the leopard, the lion, and the wolf that prevent Dante from achieving salvation—the sins of incontinence (appetite), violence (spirit), and fraudulence (reason). Let us look at four of the most vivid episodes, representing all three divisions: Paolo and Francesca in the Second Circle of the Incontinent, Farinata and Cavalcante in the Sixth Circle, which lies between the Incontinent and the Violent, as heretics partake of both sins; Brunetto Latini in the Seventh Circle of the Violent, and Ulysses in the Eighth Circle of the Fraudulent. These four episodes also illuminate the poet himself in the human sympathy he shows toward all six of the sinners.

Francesca reveals her sin through words, and it was words—reading a book—that caused her sin with Paolo. Indeed, the first action of a newly arrived sinner in Hell is to speak, to confess his sins to Minos, who then determines the appropriate circle of Hell. So many of the sinners were brought to their condition by the distortion of speech, the faculty that separates man from animal: heretics, blasphemers, panderers, seducers, simonists, diviners, hypocrites, thieves, false counselors, sowers of discord, and, in the very mouth of Satan himself, Brutus, Cassius, and Judas, those who have been treacherous to benefactors.

The speech of these sinners has brought them to the great "throat" of Hell, to the mouth of Satan, who is himself silent throughout eternity. The *Inferno* illustrates man's failure to use language properly; *Purgatorio* is a place where language is

refined and purified through fire; and in *Paradiso*, Dante glories in a heavenly language that is pure light rather than sound, the perfect silence of God. Dante has conceived the extremes of good and evil as being beyond human speech.

In addition to being intentionally banal, much of the language in Hell is inarticulate: submerged and garbled speech, gibberish, gurgles, moans, and curses. There are silent falsifiers, prophets who cannot speak, schismatics with split tongues, their throats cut, their heads severed, and the crafty Ulysses himself transformed into a tongue of flame. Even such masters of language as Virgil and Dante misunderstand each other when they find themselves among the false of speech.

Speak and hear, *dicono e odono*, echo throughout a poem which is as aural as it is visual; Hell overwhelms Dante with the sounds of shrieks, cries, groans, and lamentations. And the geography of the lustful in Canto 5 rushes at Dante in a tempest of bellowing seas and hellish storms of conflicting winds that whirl the sinners about with fury. The sinners, who were made helpless on earth by their passion, are compared to birds driven by uncontrollable winds. And there we find Dido, Helen, Cleopatra, Achilles, Paris, and Tristan, and we realize that the geography of Hell is actually the geography of earth, and that the poem is not so much about existence in Hell as it is about life on earth.

Dante, the youthful poet of love who equated love with a gentle heart but believed that the nobility of love derived from the virtuous contemplation and worship of woman, is overwhelmed by the desire to speak with the spirits of Francesca and Paolo, who are—to him—so recognizably lovers. Throughout the conversation between Dante and Francesca (the weeping Paolo is unaccountably and mysteriously silent) the two practice the ideal courtesy of their times: Francesca calls him *grazioso e benigno*. She is so touching when she reveals that she would pray to God if He were her friend and would allow it. Dante shows more sympathy for these lovers, whose families he knew and

whose love he admires—even though he has to condemn it—than for anyone else in Hell. He weeps for “grief and pity,” and provides Francesca with echoes of his own great sonnet from his *Vita Nuova*: “Love and the gentle heart are one.”

The book Francesca and Paolo were reading was about the illicit lovers Lancelot and Guinevere, from the Arthurian chivalric stories, and Dante’s own idea of the cause of their sin joins other works we have read which suggest theories of the purpose and dangers of literature: *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Frogs*, *Aeneid*, and *Tristan*. Withholding the explicit, Dante understates the emotion in a powerful way when Francesca says that Paolo’s kisses replaced the book, and “that day we read in it no further.” Dante makes a forceful claim for the hegemony of poetry.

The presentation of lovers who have let desire overcome reason, and who have both been killed by Paolo’s older brother (Francesca’s husband), echoes many of the maxims of courtly love: love quickly takes fire in the gentle heart, love absolves no one who is beloved from loving, and love brought Francesca and Paolo to one death. Faced with the pitiful condition of these lovers, a condition of his own imagination, Dante can only faint and fall to the ground of his own artistic creation, “like a dead body.”

In the tenth canto Virgil leads Dante through the byways of a “secret street” to reach Farinata and Cavalcante, heretics who spend eternity in their tombs. On the allegorical level of the poem, these are heretics whose secret life was like life in a tomb when they were living. Language again assumes a primary role when Farinata recognizes Dante by his Florentine accent and Virgil advises Dante to let his “words be fitting.” Farinata is haughty, proud, full of disdain, and, as he rises breast-high in his tomb, he seems to be all breast and brow and raised eyebrows. “Who were thy ancestors?” he demands imperiously of Dante, using *tui*, the familiar “your,” in his address to a fellow citizen.

Farinata had been a leader of the Ghibellines in the civil war with the Guelfs in the generation before Dante. The Ghibellines

had supported the Emperor and opposed the Pope, whereas Dante, in his generation, belonged to a faction of the Guelfs who wanted equality between Emperor and Pope in their respective domains.

Cavalcante, Farinata’s companion, was a Guelf, but Dante objectively considers the extremism of both parties equally sinful. He treats them respectfully, especially the father of his friend, the poet Guido Cavalcante. Cavalcante’s brief appearance is touching in the father’s concern that his son may be dead, for he is surprised to see Dante without his beloved friend Guido.

Following this brief encounter, Farinata and Dante return to their political argument, and Dante makes the surprising discovery, one that has puzzled many commentators, that the dead know the past and the future but not what is currently happening on earth. Dante perhaps intends to suggest that the sinners in Hell did not properly know the present when they were alive and so cannot know it now, and that they are forced to face a future temporal time that will one day end, whereas they will remain in Hell for eternity.

As with so much in the *Inferno*, the motif in this canto is one of speaking and hearing and, in this case, remembering, when Virgil advises Dante to remember what Farinata has said about him, as all will be made clear to him when Beatrice becomes his guide.

Dante is respectful to both Farinata and Cavalcante; in his final words to Farinata he asks him to assure Cavalcante that Guido is still alive, although Dante knows that he is on his deathbed. These two great Florentines are in Hell’s upper division, along with the lovers Francesca and Paolo, and they have Dante’s sympathy, for it was their excessive love for Florence, and not sinful nature, that overcame their reason.

Most of the souls in the second and deeper division of Hell, the violent, are punished with much greater ferocity than those in the first, but Dante, even though he can locate his respected teacher Brunetto Latini there, apparently cannot bring himself

to do more than have him walk naked across the hot, barren sand that symbolizes the infertility of sodomy. Brunetto has been "baked" and "scorched" by his sexual practices on earth and his sojourn in Hell, and Dante has been much criticized for publicizing Brunetto's private life. However, that life was hardly private to the knowing and gossipy Florentines, in whose city homosexuality, perhaps in imitation of the Greeks, had become widespread among scholars and poets.

But Dante, as he is with Paolo and Francesca, Farinata, and Cavalcante, is deeply respectful of this honored teacher and poet, whose *Little Treasure*, a poetic account of an allegorical journey, may well have inspired Dante's poem. (Note that Dante treats many other sinners with great scorn, and can even cheer their punishments.)

He addresses Brunetto with the politely honorable question "Are you here, Ser Brunetto?" and explains with reverential attitude the presence of Virgil, who, he says, is leading him home. Brunetto is still the teacher, and he gives Dante moral, ethical, and political advice. Although his speech is not as lengthy as those of the shades of Tiresias to Odysseus and of Anchises to Aeneas, it serves the same function in that Brunetto prophesies Dante's future. Virgil underscores the importance of this when he sees that Dante, like a schoolboy, is writing down what his teacher says, and he comments: "He is a good listener who takes notes." The teacher's final word to the student is that he read his book, and Dante concludes the canto with a touching comparison of his teacher to the winning runner of a footrace.

We find Ulysses in the eighth *bolgia* (ditch) of the Eighth Circle, the *bolgia* reserved for the false counselors, and he is one of Dante's greatest creations as well as one of the most puzzling. The only person actually named in the canto as evidence of Ulysses' false counsel is Achilles, whom Ulysses lured away from Deidamia and back into the fighting, concealing from him the fact that he would be killed in the battle. But Dante would consider Ulysses a man of many disguises who was

false both to himself and to others. It would also seem that Ulysses is there because he was an enemy of Virgil's heroes, the Trojans. On the other hand, Dante specifically credits Ulysses with actions which led to the dispersal of the Trojans and the consequent founding of Rome. In any case, Dante portrays Ulysses as crafty and brave up to the moment of his death, and he is condemning Ulysses, perhaps because he considers him a man who continually lusts after new experiences rather than consolidating and learning from the old.

Upon arriving at the eighth *bolgia*, Dante sees that there are multitudes of the fraudulent: their firefly-like flames flicker by the thousands on the horizon, and they restlessly move along the ditch. Again and again he uses the word *dentro*—within—to describe them as being consumed by living, and thus living eternally within the flames they themselves created. Ulysses speaks with Virgil, as a classical hero would respond only to a classical poet who had written about heroes.

In a remarkable metamorphosis, the flame that is Ulysses, tossing and murmuring, waving to and fro in the wind, becomes all tongue, flinging forth a voice. The shade of Tiresias had told Odysseus that death would come to him in old age from the sea in some way that was not warlike (*Odyssey* xi.100-37). Dante transforms the prediction into a warlike journey by sea, in which Odysseus, always questing for knowledge, attacks the island of Purgatory, and God Himself has to create a storm to prevent the hero from physically entering His spiritual territory. No Homeric poet or later Athenian playwright ever endowed Odysseus with the godlike powers that Dante attributes to him.

Ulysses tells Virgil and Dante that even his ardor for home and Penelope could not keep him there, because of his more powerful ardor for experiencing the world: his desire to know the vices and virtues of mankind. Dante, also a man who wanted to know everything, cannot but admire this man who shares his desire to know the entire world.

Setting off on his final voyage, Ulysses sailed past Spain and Morocco and on to the Pillars of Hercules, landmarks erected



by that hero-god to prevent men from going beyond the limits of the world. But in this poem these Pillars are allegorical barriers God has placed to limit man's knowledge, much as He did with the forbidden tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

In his final crafty speech to his potentially unwilling sailors—to Dante a speech of false counsel—Ulysses called on them to consider their proud heritage and not deny experience. Men are not born to live as brutes, he said, but rather as seekers after virtue and knowledge. Ulysses and the crew sailed on, and would have succeeded in storming Purgatory but for God's storm. The hero concedes defeat, but only, he concludes, because "One" willed his death. This is the same One who was no friend to Francesca and Paolo, One who will not yield, in Dante's belief, His power but rather demands that man submit to His love.

Dante's conception of Ulysses is a large step into the modern Faustian world of admiration for, and condemnation of, power and knowledge, a world in which Einstein can look with horror at the powers created by his own Odyssean craft and knowledge, and wish to put Dantean limits upon it.